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Theron Schmidt, 'Christoph Schlingensief and the Bad Spectacle', *Performance Research*, 16 (2011), 27–33 <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2011.606047>>

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Christoph Schlingensief, the *enfant terrible* of contemporary political art, died in August 2010, four years after being diagnosed with lung cancer and just months after the publication in English of a major survey of his work (Forrest and Scheer 2010).

Schlingensief's provocative work blurred the boundaries of artistic genres, as well as easy distinctions between 'art' and 'politics' – but his work can be grouped into roughly three phases: early work for film and television in the 1980s and 1990s, public actions and interventions in the 1990s and 2000s, and finally pieces that engaged with more traditional theatrical and operatic forms, such as his controversial productions of *Hamlet* in 2001 and *Parsifal* from 2004 to 2007. In this short article, I will focus on one of the most famous of his public interventions: a week-long action in Vienna titled *Bitte Liebt Österreich!* (*Please Love Austria!*, 2000), which outlives Schlingensief thanks to the availability of an excellent documentary film by Paul Poet (2002).

In this action, Schlingensief responded to a far-right turn in Austrian politics by constructing a simulation of a detention centre in a prominent public square in Vienna, populating it with twelve people whom Schlingensief claimed were seeking asylum in Austria at that time. Mimicking the *Big Brother* TV-show format, the project invited audiences and website visitors to vote each day to 'evict' two of the hopeful 'asylum seekers'; at the end of the week, it was claimed that the remaining contestant would receive a cash prize and the option to marry an Austrian citizen in order to gain the right to remain in the country. The container installation itself was festooned with right-wing quotations and fascist references – including, most prominently, a huge banner reading 'Ausländer Raus', the kind of phrase that might be hinted at by right-wing groups but which they would never allow to appear in official print. The project drew huge crowds and intense public debate; over the week, the furore over the installation grew, attracting national media attention, attempts at arson and vandalism, denunciation by the right-wing

press, and the siege of the 'detention centre' by a group of angry left-wing protestors attempting to 'free' the 'asylum seekers'.

Many commentators praise the way in which the project used performativity and participation as a way to mobilise 'the public sphere', catalysing debate and action in order to further an anti-fascist political agenda (Forrest 2008, Varney 2010). But what I think is interesting is not the way in which it uses spectacle to mobilise the public, but the way in which it reveals the idea of 'the public' to be itself spectacular – a matter of appearance, representation, and simulation. In this sense, I will argue that *Bitte Liebt Österreich!* produced a representation of the public sphere, not with the goal of recovering some 'real' politics that lies behind this representation, but in order to explore the workings of representationality itself: to build, as Schlingensiefel put it, 'a machinery to disrupt images' (quoted in Poet 2002). And above all, the image that Schlingensiefel most disrupts is that of the public sphere itself.

In this way, I would argue that Schlingensiefel's work does not oppose the idea of an engaged community with that of a falsified spectacle; instead, his work explores what might be called the politics of appearance, in which the conditions of representation are not regarded as that which must be overcome for a meaningful politics to emerge, but are themselves the domain of politics. An attention to this politics of appearance has been an emergent tendency in recent political philosophy. For example, Jacques Rancière has argued for a reconceptualisation of politics that is less concerned with the particularities of individual political discourses than with the pre-discursive conditions that allow for certain gestures and speech-acts to be recognised as valid while others are excluded. Rancière writes, 'Politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak' (2004: 13). Similarly, Giorgio Agamben writes that 'The task of politics is to return appearance itself to appearance, to cause appearance itself to appear' (2000: 95). In the present context, I want to draw parallels between Schlingensiefel's provocation and Jean-Luc Nancy's arguments about the relationship between spectacle and community, which are particularly relevant because they are conceived with an explicit awareness of the threat of totalitarianism.

Through his idea of an 'inoperative community', Nancy seeks to revitalise an understanding of 'community' as a source of radical political vision. But in his reappraisal, he insists on an ontology of community that is conceived as neither the coming together of

distinctly subjectivated individuals, nor the expression of any transcendental spirit of the people. Nancy characterises both of these as based on a kind of 'immanentism', a dangerous ideology that tends, in the end, toward totalitarianism. Nancy argues that by idealising some form of being that presupposes and outlives our momentary instances of coming together, both individualism and totalitarianism prepare the ground for the embodiment of the people in a single form: *Gemeinschaft*, fatherland, Leader (1991: xxxix, 3). Instead, Nancy is interested in an idea of political community which is built from the ground up on the basis of selves (or 'singularities') that are defined by their finitude, rather than their autonomy, and 'which always presents itself as being-in-common'. The idea of 'finitude' implies a kind of incompleteness, but Nancy is not suggesting that community might provide that missing completion. Instead, in Nancy's ontology *all* Being is characterised by finitude, including both the Being of singularity and the Being of community.

In place of ideas of wholeness, completion, or communion, Nancy proposes an idea of Being whose very being-ness exists through its exposure to others, an exposure which he describes as 'compearance' or 'co-appearance' (*com-parution*): 'Finitude compears, that is to say it is exposed: that is the essence of community' (1991: 29). In his later writing, Nancy reiterates that compearance is not some form of revelation or manifestation, or the 'becoming-visible' of something that has an ongoing, invisible existence separate from its appearance. Instead it is only through co-appearance that our being-together, our experience of society, is constituted:

In this sense, there is no society without spectacle; or more precisely, there is no society without the spectacle of society. Although already a popular ethnological claim or, in the Western tradition, a claim about the theater, this proposition must be understood as ontologically radical. There is no society without the spectacle because society is the spectacle of itself.

(Nancy 2000: 67)

In this way, Nancy reverses the typical opposition between spectacle and society, writing that 'the various critiques of "spectacular" alienation are, in the end, grounded on the distinction between a good spectacle and a bad spectacle' (2000: 68). To illustrate these positions, Nancy evokes the figures of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Guy Debord.

In this characterisation, Rousseau stands for the argument that the 'good' spectacle is a faithful representation of 'the people itself', a community that exists independently of its spectacularisation and indeed is alive in the spectacle itself – as exemplified by the republican festivals, village fêtes, displays of gymnastics, 'balls for young marriageable persons', and the like, prescribed by Rousseau in his *Lettre à d'Alembert sur les spectacles* (2004: 343-48). As Jonas Barish comments, 'The key to [Rousseau's] newer, and at the same time older, form of spectacle is total participation [...]. No one any longer *represents* anyone other than himself' (1981: 290, original emphasis). On the other hand, Debord represents the position that the 'bad' spectacle – that is, commodity-based media culture – is an unfaithful representation of our true potential, as exemplified by Debord's opening declaration in *The Society of the Spectacle*: 'All that once was directly lived has become mere representation' (1994: 12). Debord and his followers called for the construction of 'situations' that would overcome this alienated separation. As Debord describes it, this activity 'begins on the other side of the modern collapse of the idea of the theatre' – again, through the involvement of its participants as neither spectators nor actors but 'livers' (2006: 98-99).

However, Nancy argues that the distinction between spectacle and community that underpins ideas of both the 'good' and the 'bad' spectacle is misconceived. Instead, the spectacle of community is all there is: for Nancy, this is the only basis for an idea of community that is not derived from immanentism, and that does not therefore prepare the ground for totalitarianism. Nancy argues against the myth of the 'good' mimesis of the Athenian theatre, in which the spectacular representation of the people was supposedly the same thing as the realisation of the ideal community; and he also rejects the need to transcend the 'bad' mimesis that allegedly characterises modern society and which must be overcome in the name of true politics (2000: 71-3). In contrast to this false opposition, Nancy proposes an understanding of community that is fundamentally spectacular.

But what would this look like? In a rare passage in which Nancy comments on what kind of action might prepare the ground for the inoperative community, he writes:

We do not have to identify ourselves as 'we,' as a 'we.' Rather, we have to dis-identify ourselves *from* every sort of 'we' that would be the subject of its own representation, and we have to do this *insofar* as 'we' co-appear.

(Nancy 2000: 71, original emphasis)

Unlike Rousseau or Debord, Nancy does not distinguish between a 'world of appearances' and the world of 'real' identities and relationships; instead, it is through our appearances on what Nancy calls 'the stage of the "we"' that we are related (2000: 66) – and we are only related insofar as we appear. I want to turn now to a consideration of the forms of co-appearance that are produced by *Bitte Liebt Österreich!* – a project that deliberately frustrates the processes of identification, and in which 'we' exists as a disputed concept, as a fiction, as something not yet determined rather than a reliable category to which one can either belong or remove oneself from.

Kirsten Weiss rightly situates Schlingensiefel within a tradition of Austro-German unease about the production of a community as an aesthetic object, as such an undertaking is obviously problematic within the legacy of state fascism (Weiss 2001). In *Bitte Liebt Österreich!*, as in many of Schlingensiefel's projects, the spectre of state fascism does not so much lurk behind the scene as walk blatantly amongst it. In Poet's film, this happens in a particularly poignant way during a scene in which Schlingensiefel, in his customary role as ringleader and barker, calls out to the assembled crowd through his megaphone: 'Step in, ladies and gentlemen! Get inside the peepshow! Pick and watch your own asylum seeker! It's absolutely free!' As he encourages tourists to take photographs of the 'land of the fascists', he is joined by an elderly man in ramshackle military dress with an Austrian flag draped around his shoulders. 'We got Austria! Foreigners out!' the man chimes in. 'Away with 'em!' shouts Schlingensiefel. 'With transportation cars – away!' echoes the man.

Again and again, these kinds of exhortations and confusions are depicted in Poet's documentary. A man shouts at Schlingensiefel, 'You are an enemy to Austria and you have to be deported!' Someone who hates the xenophobic messages breaks in at night and tries to set the containers alight. Another attacks the structures with acid. A protestor is shown being taken away in a police car after defending the rights of foreigners. 'Where are the dirty pigs who authorised this?' he shouts as he is dragged away. Another woman first attempts to persuade the gathered crowd that 'those who already stay here shall remain here, and they shall have equal rights to the Austrians.' But then, seemingly unaware of the contradictions of her own xenophobic language, she shouts, 'Those *Piefkes* [an offensive term comparable to 'Krauts'] always start these things!' She demands that the container be taken down, 'otherwise there is going to be a war between us! We want to have our peace,' she shrieks, again without any apparent awareness of irony, as she smashes her hand

violently against the fence surrounding the container. Soon she is marching through the crowd, chanting 'Kick out the *Piefkes*! Foreigners in!' As she is removed by security staff, she gets in one last jab: 'You German swine! You *artist*!'

Schlingensief would not disagree with these insults, and his statements make it clear that he conceives of this as a theatrical project and rather than a political project in any traditional sense – and also that this distinction permits a certain amount of ethical irresponsibility. In his words, he echoes and accepts the accusations made against him:

Amnesty International would have done it differently. This was no AI-thing. This was no project of the kind 'show me your wounds'! It wasn't that we wanted to get green cards for all twelve of them. In some aspects this venture was swinish to the highest degree.

(Schlingensief interviewed in Poet 2002)

Throughout the documentary, Schlingensief is depicted interacting with the crowd in ways that emphasise the artificial nature of the project, but with a paradoxical assertiveness that is his customary mode of operation. In one scene, for example, he says, 'So now we will initiate an act that is real. I'm saying it again: this is a performance of the *Wiener Festwochen* [Vienna Festival Week]. This is an actor! This is the absolute truth!' As Thomas Irmer writes, this ambiguity is central to the working of the piece, and must be understood as its key effect, not a means to an end: 'nobody really understood to what extent everything was staged, so the boundaries between aesthetics (the container game) and reality (the German and Austrian political situation) could be explored only by destroying the entire project' (Irmer 2002: 63).

This risk of destruction came most closely to being realised on the penultimate day, when a large group of left-wing activists assembled with banners, whistles, and chants, eventually storming the installation in an attempt to 'free' the 'asylum seekers'. The documentary depicts this as the moment of greatest actual danger, as the protestors climbed onto a structure that was not designed to support so many people. Mathias Lilienthal recalls the way that the situation was defused by selecting a delegation of six protestors to bring their message to the 'asylum seekers': 'We want to liberate you! We want to bring you freedom! We are from the anti-fascistic front!' they shout. The situation is defused as Schlingensief's team accede to releasing the 'asylum seekers' – though this is shown to amount to little more than bundling them into the same black Mercedes as was

used to take previous 'losers' to be 'deported' – and one of the protestors is shown happy and smiling, declaring that 'Now they will all be freed.'

Earlier in the documentary, Schlingensief is shown announcing through his megaphone: 'This is film! This is film! We produce the images that Austria definitely does not need!' The protestors attempt to efface these images, to replace them with a representation of liberation by liberating the representations of refugees. They fail to understand that the whole operation is working under the logic of the image, of which they are only a part. Schlingensief comments,

Sure it's easy to misinterpret the whole thing, but I have not the least [bit] of understanding for the whole bunch of peace activists and those charmingly sweet resistance fighters. I just don't get their way. When I am bugged by something, when something just doesn't seem right, I need to disturb the picture [*Bild*], presented as the wholesome and right one. The whole container-thing was a machinery to disrupt images!

(Schlingensief interviewed in Poet 2002)

Here is a clear articulation of how Schlingensief considers his work to be political, and how it differentiates itself from other kinds of political action. He admits no sympathy for traditional activism, which works through declared opposition to available political discourses. Instead, Schlingensief operates on the level of appearance, of spectacle, of the representational regime of images. This is how he theatricalises politics.

His spectators may not represent anyone other than themselves, but *Bitte Liebt Österreich!* is clearly not what Rousseau had in mind: this is not the 'good spectacle' of the restored community. Nor, as Peter Boenisch points out, can we compare Schlingensief to Brecht, in that no distance is possible for either director or spectators (Boenisch 2010: 102). And neither was he like Debord; his immersive situations were not alternatives to the alienation of everyday life, but wholeheartedly embrace the everyday in all its complexity and ugliness. This makes for a fragmented and chaotic scene, but perhaps this is what is implied by Nancy's notion of the inoperative community: singularities that are not working together to produce some ideal form of themselves, but are instead manifested as fractured and fractious, inconsistent and incomplete. Such a 'bad spectacle' might be the necessary site of our being-in-common, for it is only as we dis-identify ourselves from this fictional



'we'- this myth of community - that we begin to appear to each other: ecstatic, finite, and exposed.

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